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# Thoughts on Social Justice: A Personal Manifesto

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Grace Howell

Intro to Social Justice

December 11, 2018

*Thoughts on Social Justice: A Personal Manifesto*

Social Justice is a phrase that has been flippantly thrown around for decades. Professionals, media, politicians, activists, religious leaders, and lay people use this term to refer to a variety of different focuses. How can something so progressive in nature lack such direction among the people fighting for its cause? The reality of this lack in clarity has cluttered my thoughts over the past semester as I have plummeted into this question. One simple question has left me with many more. In a journey of self-discovery, I plan to attempt to narrow the views of many on social justice into one idea. However, the singularity of this idea does not imply its simplicity. The issue still naturally begs for complexity, and I plan to speak on those complexities in an effort to support the original defining idea. So, what is social justice? *Social Justice is the faithful fight towards equitable distribution of resources and equal rights for all people, both domestically and in foreign contexts.* To prevent the assumptions of what this definition does and does not mean, I will break apart each defining characteristic for further explanation.

What does it mean for Social Justice to be a *faithful fight*? First, the descriptor, faithful, must be considered. In this definition, I am intending the word '*faithful*' to mean two separate ideas. As a believer in Jesus Christ, it is my mission to model my life after him and the Living Word of Wisdom he has given me. The Bible provides beautiful commands and examples of Social Justice that withstands all time. Some of these include:

“Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” Isaiah 1:17

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Romans 12:15-18

“Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.” Luke 10:30-37

Though these few verses provide insight into the heart of the Father for Social Justice, there is a multitude more to review. These commands and examples of Social Justice provide the first meaning of ‘faithful’ to the definition. As a believer, I am commanded toward Social Justice because God the Father made it the law of his heart and God Incarnate fulfilled it in his own life. Social Justice is faithful because it the workings of people to be faithful to the mission and

commands of God. However, Social Justice is also faithful in that it is a promise that the Lord will be faithful to his creation. Revelation 21:4 says, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Only in the glory and perfection of the second coming of Christ will this Earth be restored to Social Justice. So, why is Social Justice faithful? Through it, humanity is able to faithfully work toward the commands of Creator God, while also acknowledging his perfect faithfulness to do the job in completion when he comes again. Keeping these two perspectives in mind is what makes Social Justice a faithful *fight*. These two concepts of how to view biblical justice can often be set against each other. I would argue that the command to work toward Social Justice and to trust in Jesus to ultimately bring it to fruition work beautifully and powerfully together. When they do, they manifest themselves into a righteous fight. Social Justice is not easy and can sometimes seem like a hopeless goal. Sin is incredibly ruthless in the lives of many governments and people, making the work of justice adversarial. But, understanding how the fight represents a faithfulness that is divine in nature helps to see the need for and hope of the fight.

What is the *equitable distribution of resources* and why is that a mark of Social Justice? Equitable Distribution is most commonly known as a divorce law term. It ensures equitable, or fair, distribution of property and debt obligations when allocating marital property in divorce court proceedings. Though this precise idea is not what I am implying in my definition of Social Justice, it does provide some wisdom. To be equitable is to be fair. Socially, this means the fair division of resources for a sufficient and healthy life in society. This would include injustices such as food, transportation, and housing insecurity. In his Pulitzer-Prize winning book, *Evicted*, Matthew Desmond surveys a variety of different families struggling with housing insecurity,

specifically evictions. Regarding this specific issue, Desmond writes, “It is hard to argue that housing is not a fundamental human need. Decent, affordable housing should be a basic right for everybody in this country. The reason is simple: without stable shelter, everything else falls apart” (Desmond, 2016, p. 300). To achieve Social Justice it to provide for the needs of the people. Desmond also writes, “If poverty persists in America, it is not for lack of resources” (Desmond, 2016, p. 312). These needs can be met. Resources are present but not distributed justly. A fair distribution prevents certain groups of people with power from hoarding all the resources, thus further allowing them and the system to marginalize more and more people. A fight for Social Justice calls for resources of a sustainable life to be distributed to all.

Social justice also calls for *equal rights for all people*. It common to hear terms like “equality for all” thrown around in conversations, but what does that mean? First, it is important to distinguish the terms ‘equal’ and ‘equitable.’ As I mentioned above, equitable refers to fairness or impartiality, whereas equal refers to the same or a balance. To provide clarity, an example is if there were two groups of people who each received 50% of a resource, this would-be equality. However, this does not guarantee equitability. One group might represent a higher percentage of the population than the other, thus making the needs of one group go unmet over the other, despite the equality. The opposite is true – a profit may be equitably distributed but equality could be manipulated in the process. Therefore, it is important for Social Justice to include both equitability and equality. However, the definition attributes equality to civil rights for a reason. To have equal rights means that every person has the same rights both legally and socially. Bryan Stevenson surveys this lack of equality in his best-selling book, *Just Mercy*, where he examines capital punishment and the death penalty, to which he presents as “them without the capital get the punishment” (Stevenson, 2015, p. 6). He writes about what inequality

looks like in the criminal justice system. Through focusing on the unbelievable case of Walter McMillian, he learns about “our system’s disturbing indifference to inaccurate or unreliable verdicts, our comfort with bias, and our tolerance of unfair prosecutions and convictions” (Stevenson, 2015, p. 17). In his work, Stevenson highlights the reality that though our country has reached a point where we have equal rights legally, sometimes these do not play out socially, whether it be through manipulation or subtyping. Racism, for example, is not the legal mistreatment and discrimination against black people like it was in the Civil Rights era. Modern Racism rejects explicit discrimination socially and legally but breeds it implicitly through prejudice, privilege, and a lack of proximity with the out-group. Social Justice can only operate fully on an equal ground. What people lack in rights, they lack in distribution. Yet, what people lack in distribution, they lack in rights.

Lastly, Social Justice is *for all people, both domestically and in foreign contexts*. Given that social justice is a humanity issue, it is not subject to a specific group, or country, of people. In many ways, the governmental policy set the trajectory for how Social Justice operates in a country, but that does not mean that Social Justice has a place in one country over the other. The Bible says that all people are made in the image of God, not just Americans or people who are like you. The justice of each of those people and the countries they reside in are a part of the Social Justice fight. The Bible discusses those who are “sojourners” or “aliens” in the land quite often. Exodus 22:21 says, “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” Also, Galatians 5:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Cultural diversity and care for the “other” is crucial to fulfilling biblical Social Justice.

The Social Justice definition I have provided is in no way perfect, or even close. This is a constant struggle when dealing with real people and real problems. These issues are complex and deserve great attention to strive for excellence. The more questions answered the more that pop up. It takes humility and a gentle, teachable spirit to allow for growth when pushing to answer the questions of Social Justice. However, I do believe that this definition provides a clear starting point that is moldable circumstantially. Through its many elements, each clause provides deeper levels of clarity that leave room for correct assumptions and intentional criticism. Despite all of that, I am confident in one thing. Social Justice, as complex as it is, can be summed up in just two thoughtful words to communicate its applicable and practical nature: empathy and compassion. In his beautiful work, *Far From the Tree*, Andrew Solomon considers empathy amongst a variety of different and complex parent-child relationships. Concerned with the connection between prejudice and empathy, he writes, “All people are both the objects and the perpetrators of prejudice. Our understanding of the prejudice directed against us informs our responses to others. Universalizing from the cruelties we have known, however, has its limits, and the parents of a child with a horizontal identity often fail at empathy” (Solomon, 2012, p. 18). The simple truth is that a lack of empathy painfully drives us apart, whereas an abundance of empathy brings us closer together. Social Justice and its success hinge on empathy, in the intimate relationships (parent-child) and the cross-cultural ones. However, empathy is not always super proactive. Empathy must be paired with compassion to be productive. If empathy allows for genuine concern and feelings to be acknowledged, compassion takes that empathy and pairs it with a desire to help. Essentially, empathy is useless if nothing moves forward to a better tomorrow. So, what does empathy pushed toward compassion look like practically? In Arkadelphia, there is a small CASA (Court-Appointed Special Advocate) chapter that operates

out of the local courthouse. CASA exists to partner with the local Department of Human Services to join a trained CASA volunteer and a foster care child/case so that the child has an advocate in all parts of their life – court, school, etc. When I asked the Director of CASA Clark County, the only full-time employee in this chapter, what the mission of CASA was, this was her answer: “To end abuse. Until then, we will advocate for these children whose voice is often ignored.” Essentially, the CASA Director communicated to me that the goal of CASA is to completely eradicate the need for its services. This is empathy and compassion that creates Social Justice. Empathy is acknowledging the needs of other people and feeling it with them. Compassion pushes people forward to find ways to help. Social Justice works towards meeting those needs.

Living in a broken, sinful world is the very reason I am discussing Social Justice. To have justice, there first needs to be an injustice. These injustices vary in type and in severity. However, I believe that all injustice, all sin, is rooted in the original fruit tree sin of pride. Inner pride is what allows for injustice to spread. In Toni Morrison’s wonderful work, *The Origin of Others*, she considers this idea of the ‘other.’ One powerful thought she articulates reads:

The urgency of distinguishing between those who belong to the human race and those who are decidedly non-human is so powerful the spotlight turns away and shines not on the object of degradation but on its creator. ... The danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger. To lose one’s racial-ized rank is to lose one’s own valued and enshrined difference.

(Morrison, 2017, p. 29-30).

All humanity operates in two realms – the in-group and the out-group. These groups strive to create clear and strict borders that make it easy for everyone around to see who is who. It is in



one's personal in-group where the first understanding of the 'other' is born. Because we view ourselves so highly, and the 'other' is not a part of our group, they must not be as superior. In writing, this seems rather blunt, explicit, and harsh. But subconsciously, this is how the average human internally operates. It is a daily battle to fight these selfish desires of comfort and self-preservation. It is when this idea of the 'other' is opposed and repented of that true Social Justice can breed life in all in-groups and out-groups, fusing them together as one group - humanity.

Overall, this journey through many books, articles, and discussions has led me closer to the truth of this question. However, it has mostly led me closer to the divine reality of this calling on my life. I am perfectly content thinking critically on this question, what is Social Justice, for the rest of my life. This field deserves critical thinking about the inner workings of its function and the motive behind its direction. Yet, I do believe there is only one true way to journey towards a greater definition of Social Justice. The more we do it, the more we understand it. It seems rather backward to continue to participate in something that has no definitive foundation. However, a field such as Social Justice that deals with the inner workings of people, families, organizations, churches, and governments longs for experienced clarity. This clarity cannot be forced, created in a lab or conference room, or even discovered through individual thought. This clarity comes from experience with, in, and through the real lives of people and their heartaches. So, what is Social Justice? Though I have given an answer, for the sake of any future discoveries, I will truly say, "I don't know." I am only beginning to scratch the surface of what it means to practically love justice and walk humbly in it. I pray that as I embark on this new journey into Social Justice practically, spiritually, physically, and emotionally, the Lord continues to reveal to me his heart for his image-bearers and my role as a Social Justice seeker until he comes back.

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